

Parenting with A.W.E.

The key to helping your teenager grow

By Jim Burns

Q. It feels like we're always arguing with our 15-year-old. We're tired of the constant conflict, and I'm sure she is too. What can we do?

A. As parents of teenagers, many of us could find reason to be mad at our kids most of the time. Teenagers are in a stage of testing—not just your authority, but their own judgment and independence. They make decisions that even they know are unwise, just to see what will happen. They argue just to flex their mental muscles. They push the limits because it truly is the best way for them to discover for themselves why those limits exist. As frustrating as all that conflict can be, it is part of every teenager's journey to adulthood.

While there's not much you can do to change your teenager, you can change the ways you respond to her. I find that some parents of teens revert to an old style of parenting called "shame-based parenting." Shame-based parenting is when we get desperate enough to shame our kids into obedience by saying things like, "You should know better," or "Why did you do something so stupid?" It works, but only for a short time. After all, our greater goal is not just to bring about obedience today but to raise responsible adults for tomorrow.

There is a more effective way to parent our teens. I call it "parenting with A.W.E." It's not easy, but it is a much more effective strategy for successfully raising teens to be responsible adults. While no family is "Leave it to Beaver" perfect, I do believe we can do a much better job of creating an atmosphere of A.W.E. (Affection, Warmth, Encouragement). Here's how to make your home more A.W.E.-some:

Show lots of Affection

Most teenagers are not very excited about hugs and kisses from their parents, especially in front of their peers. But appropriate loving gestures of touch along with words of affection and love will do wonders for your relationship. I watched a dad pull his 16-year-old son toward him and kiss him on the forehead while saying "I love you and I'm proud of you." His son was visibly moved by his father's action. It didn't look easy for either the father or the son but the result will be tremendously important for their relationship.

Fill your home with Warmth

There is no such thing as a home without conflict, but we need to work relentlessly to reduce stress in our families. If that means fewer activities, less travel, lighter schedules, do it. If you need the help of a counselor or pastor to give you some guidance, do it. If the family needs to rethink how they treat each other, do it. Think about the type of home you are creating. Is your home a place the kids enjoy being in, or is it a negative, critical war zone? Proactively reduce stress in order to create a warm home environment. Start today.

Provide tons of Encouragement

Affirmation is a much greater motivator than guilt and shame. One model of communication says it takes nine affirming comments to make up for just one critical comment. Sure our teens need discipline, and you should discipline with consistency, but they also need words of encouragement. They will respond much greater to a compliment and affirmation than a negative, angry putdown. One family I know keeps an "affirmation jar" on the kitchen table where they leave one another notes of encouragement.

Creating a home with A.W.E. isn't always easy. This is especially true if you came from a shame-based family yourself. But what kind of a home would you rather have? What kind of home is more successful? It starts with a proactive approach to parenting teens, and the result is a close-knit family with kids ready to become responsible adults.

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